

EXHIBIT 4


Qatar emerges as key player in Afghanistan after US pullout

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By AYA BATRAWY August 30, 2021 GMT

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Qatar played an outsized role in U.S. efforts to evacuate tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan. Now the tiny Gulf Arab state is being asked to help shape what is next for Afghanistan because of its ties with both Washington and the Taliban, who are in charge in Kabul.

Qatar will be among global heavyweights on Monday when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosts a virtual meeting to discuss a coordinated approach for the days ahead, as the U.S. completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of the country. The meeting will also include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the European Union and NATO.

Qatar is also in talks about providing civilian technical assistance to the Taliban at Kabul's international airport once the U.S. military withdrawal is complete on Tuesday.

Qatar's Foreign Ministry confirmed to The Associated Press it has been taking part in negotiations about the operations of the Kabul airport with Afghan and international parties, mainly the United States and Turkey. Qatar said its main priority is restoring regular operations while preserving safety and security at the airport facilities.

Meanwhile, international U.N. agencies are asking Qatar for help and support in delivering aid to Afghanistan.

Qatar's role was somewhat unexpected. The nation, which shares a land border with Saudi Arabia and a vast underwater gas field in the Persian Gulf with Iran, was supposed to be a transit point for a just a few thousand people airlifted from Afghanistan over a timeline of several months.

After the surprisingly swift Taliban takeover of Kabul on Aug. 15, the United States looked to Qatar to help shoulder the evacuations of tens of thousands in a chaotic and hurried airlift.

In the end, nearly 40% of all evacuees were moved out via Qatar, winning its leadership heaps of praise from Washington. International media outlets also leaned on Qatar for their own staff evacuations. The United States said Saturday that 113,500 people had been evacuated from Afghanistan since Aug. 14. Qatar says a little more than 43,000 had transited through the country.

Qatar's role in the evacuations reflects its position as host of the Middle East's biggest U.S. military base, but also its decision years ago to host the Taliban's political leadership in exile, giving it some sway with the militant group. Qatar also hosted U.S.-Taliban peace talks.

Assistant Qatari Foreign Minister Lolwa al-Khater acknowledged the political gains scored by Qatar in the past weeks, but rebuffed any suggestion that Qatar's efforts were purely strategic.

"If anyone assumes that it's only about political gains, believe me, there are ways to do PR that are way easier than risking our people there on the ground, way easier than us having sleepless nights literally for the past two weeks, way less complicated than spending our time looking after every kid and every pregnant woman," she told The Associated Press.

For some of the most sensitive rescue efforts in Afghanistan, Qatar conducted the operation with just a few hundred troops and its own military aircraft. Qatar evacuated a girls' boarding school, an all-girls robotics team and journalists working for international media, among others. Qatar's ambassador accompanied convoys of buses through a gauntlet of Taliban checkpoints in Kabul and past various Western military checkpoints at the airport, where massive crowds had gathered, desperate to flee.

In all, al-Khater said Qatar secured passage to the airport for some 3,000 people and airlifted as many as 1,500 after receiving requests from international organizations and vetting their names.

Al-Khater said Qatar was uniquely positioned because of its ability to speak to various parties on the ground and its willingness to escort people through Taliban-controlled Kabul.

"What many people don't realize is that this trip is not a phone call to Taliban," she said. "You have checkpoints by the U.S. side, by the British side, by the NATO side, by the Turkish side ... and we have to juggle with all of these variables and factors."

The Taliban have promised amnesty to all those who remain in Afghanistan. Still, many of those desperate to get out — including civil society activists, those who had worked for Western armies and women afraid to lose hard-won rights — say they do not trust the militants. In addition, other armed groups pose a growing threat. Last week, an attack by an Islamic State suicide bomber killed more than 180 people outside Kabul airport.

The U.S.-led evacuation process has been marred by miscalculation and chaos, and that spilled over to the al-Udeid base in Qatar.

The hangars at al-Udeid were so crammed that the United States halted flights from Kabul for several hours during the peak of evacuation efforts on Aug. 20. Nearby countries, like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, accepted several thousand evacuees to alleviate

pressure on the American base.

At al-Udeid, Afghan families evacuated by the U.S. waited for hours in poorly ventilated, humid hangars in the middle of the desert with inadequate cooling. A video posted by The Washington Post showed hundreds of evacuees in one such hangar with only one lavatory and people sleeping on the ground.

Qatar built an emergency field hospital, additional shelters and portable washrooms to help plug the gaps. In addition to what the U.S. military is distributing, the Qatari military is handing out 50,000 meals a day, and more still by local charities. Qatar Airways has also provided 10 aircraft to transport evacuees from its capital, Doha, to other countries.

Around 20,000 evacuees remain in Qatar, some expecting to leave in a matter of weeks and others in months to come as they await resettlement elsewhere. Seven Afghan women have delivered babies since their arrival in Qatar.

Qatar is absorbing only a very small number of evacuees, among them a group of female students who will be offered scholarships to continue their education in Doha. Qatar is also hosting some evacuees in furnished apartment facilities built for the FIFA World Cup, which will be played in Doha next year.

The energy-rich nation is a tiny country with a little more than 300,000 citizens, where expatriate foreign workers on temporary visas far outnumber the local population.

The White House says President Joe Biden personally expressed his appreciation to Qatar's 41-year-old Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani by phone and noted that the U.S.-led airlift would not have been possible without Qatar's support facilitating the transfer of thousands of people daily.

It's the kind of positive publicity that millions of dollars spent by Gulf Arab states on lobbying and public relations could scarcely guarantee.

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